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Directorate of Intelligence
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Yugoslavia: Prospects for Violence

Summary

Declarations of independence by Slovenia and Croatia probably will be the prelude to a confrontation with Serbia that could lead to an escalation of violence. The decisions of political leaders in Croatia and Serbia will have the major impact on the scope and severity of any violence, but events could spiral out of the control of any leader. Any eruption of significant violence is likely to involve Serb-populated areas of Croatia, ethnically-mixed regions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, or Kosovo.

The potential combatants are well enough armed to carry out anything from scattered bombings and shootings to full-scale civil war. Civil war is the less likely outcome, but we believe that even under the best of circumstances, escalating communal violence in the coming weeks or months will probably produce casualties in the hundreds. If republic paramilitary and federal Army forces are drawn in, the scale of fighting could expand dramatically.

Finally, although it is unlikely, there remains at least a small chance that the factions will still manage to avoid a serious escalation of violence.

*This memorandum was prepared by the Office of European Analysis.
Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to*

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Discussion

Of the two impending declarations of independence, it is Croatia's which is the potential fuse to an explosion. In contrast to Croatia, Slovenia lacks significant ethnic or political minorities opposed to independence. Moreover, Slovenia probably will couple its independence declaration with an acknowledgment of the need for further talks with federal authorities over details of separation--a bid to deflect any violent federal reaction. The federal Army, for its part, has shown no interest in directly contesting Slovenian separation or going beyond such harassing actions as its seizure last weekend of 12 Slovenian national guard trainer aircraft. These actions, however, are likely to continue. [REDACTED]

The Fuse: Croatia

Croatia, with a Serbian minority equivalent to 11 percent of its population, is in a much more precarious situation and Croatian leaders know it. On the one hand, they fear being left isolated by Slovenian secession, which has the tacit concurrence of most Yugoslav factions. On the other hand, they know that outright secession would spark an armed conflict with the Serbs, who might have the support of much of the federal Army. Unlike Slovenia, Croatia faces de facto federal Army occupation of large pieces of its territory. [REDACTED]

Croatia's "independence" declaration today fell short of full separation from Yugoslavia, as Croat leaders maneuvered to sidestep an immediate showdown with the Serbs.

- The declaration said that Croatia is beginning the process of separation, and included a bill of minority rights.
- The Croatians have done little of the legal groundwork for independence already finished by Slovenia.
- For example, they resorted this week to adopting near duplicates of existing federal laws to fill the gaps. [REDACTED]

Croatian President Franjo Tudjman must decide between trying to regain Serb-occupied territories by force and Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic's offer to negotiate a new territorial settlement on terms likely to be unfavorable to Croatia. Tempers are running high and there is no assurance Tudjman will feel able to opt for low-risk actions.

- Croatian security forces have completed contingency plans to use search and destroy tactics to eject armed Serb radicals from eastern Croatia, [REDACTED]

- Even a limited move against the Serbs by Croatian security forces almost certainly would spark significant fighting that could spread into Bosnian territory and draw in federal Army units. [REDACTED]

The Flame: The Serbs

We believe that Serbian strongman Milosevic remains committed to his goal of incorporating all Serb-occupied territory into Serbia. Milosevic-allied leaders in the Serb enclave of Krajina in Croatia have announced plans to unite on Friday with a neighboring Serb enclave in Bosnia-Herzegovina, effectively erasing the border between the republics. At the behest of the legislature of Serbia's Vojvodina Province--a frequent stalking horse for Milosevic--the Serbian republic assembly is to meet this weekend to debate annexation of Serb lands in Croatia. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] He has vowed that no Serbs can be forced to leave the federation against their will, and the Serb moves in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina suggest that he means what he says. Given the risks involved, however, he probably will wait to assess Croatia's declaration before committing himself to an armed confrontation. [REDACTED]

The Powder: Well-Armed Antagonists

The potential combatants in Yugoslavia are sufficiently well armed to engage in violence ranging from scattered shootings and bombings--already daily fare in Serb-populated areas of Croatia--to full scale civil war.

- The main factions include the loosely organized ethnic militias, republic national guard forces, and the federal Army. [REDACTED]

The least predictable group is that composed of local ethnic militias. These groups so far appear to be under control of their ethnic leaders, but they almost certainly have the potential to get out of hand. Serb militants in the Slavonian region of Croatia, for example, this spring tortured captured Croatian police officers before executing them--almost certainly without the approval of Serb political leaders. [REDACTED]

Yugoslavia is a gun-toting society, and weapons were easy to obtain legally even under Communist rule. A recent report by the federal police to parliament revealed that as of 1989, 1.6 million Yugoslavs legally owned guns--roughly 36 percent of the adult male population. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, where ethnic Muslim, Serb, and Croat groups reportedly are forming, 270,000 individuals own 323,000 weapons, according to the police.

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These figures almost certainly have risen significantly as a result of feverish black market arms purchasing that federal officials say is taking place throughout the country. [REDACTED]

Slovenia and Croatia have both formed well-armed paramilitary national guards under the direct control of republic authorities. These forces include many personnel from the Territorial Defense Forces, which have been trained to fight a guerilla war against the conventional forces of foreign invader--skills which can be turned against the Serbs or Army.

- Slovenia unilaterally put its 60,000-man territorial forces under republic control early last year.
- Croatia's Interior Ministry established paramilitary units last year and created a reserve force of between 40,000 and 70,000 men drawn largely from the territorial defense rolls. In April, the republic legislature created the "National Guard Corps," a de facto republic army, by transferring command of the paramilitary forces to the Defense Ministry. Press reports indicate that Croatia also has an elite Special Forces unit of between 3,000 and 5,000 men. [REDACTED]

The federal Army has roughly 110,000 men in its ground forces, with over one-third of them stationed in Slovenia and Croatia. The Army is well-equipped with modern weaponry, and the supporting air force has a ground attack capability. The Army, however, is trained to fight a conventional war against an invader--not to deal with the kind of partisan warfare for which republic forces are trained. [REDACTED]

Scenarios for Violence

Almost any scenario involving significant violence will unfold in one of the following hotspots:

- The Slavonian area in eastern Croatia, where Serb-majority towns are scattered throughout a Croat-majority region. Serbs in this area say publicly that they already have organized an armed underground, and Croatian contingency planning for the use of its security forces focuses on this region.
- The Serb-majority "Krajina" region of Croatia. The Krajina fields a reasonably well organized, if poorly trained, Serb militia built on the old Serb-dominated police force. [REDACTED] Croatian paramilitary commandos are closely watching the borders, and Croatian President Tudjman has threatened on several occasions to send them in to reestablish control.

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- Ethnically-mixed areas in Bosnia-Herzegovina. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Republic officials say all have established militias and concede that republic police have lost control.
- Kosovo, where Albanian activism is on the rise again after a year of tough Serbian repression. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

We believe that these circumstances make a significant elevation of interethnic communal violence likely in the coming weeks and months.

- It probably would be limited to relatively contained geographic areas and fall short of conventional civil war if JNA commanders remain cautious and republic leaders avoid major blunders.
- Casualties probably will still range into the hundreds.
- It would be more serious if, as is likely, republic security forces and federal military units become involved. This could set off more violence, and clashes between republic and federal forces could ensue.
[REDACTED]

Several developments probably would trigger communal fighting.

- Croatian leaders have not yet accepted that they have lost control over the Krajina. Serbs probably will resort to further violence to drive home the point. If Croatia sends in security forces, a clash with local Serbs is inevitable, and a direct confrontation with Serbia a possibility.
- Pressure from nationalists is building in Croatia to deal with the Serb rebellion and probably will result in at least some security sweeps aimed at clamping down on Serbs in Slavonia, which has a Croatian majority.
- Ethnically mixed Bosnia-Herzegovina is a potential battleground. It is also the potential basis for a deal between Tadjman and Milosevic. Any deal, however, would probably require significant population moves—a Bosnian Muslim leader recently estimated that 800,000 would be affected—that almost certainly would provoke ethnic violence. [REDACTED]

We believe that escalation to full-scale civil war--marked by combat between organized military units--cannot be discounted but is less likely in the near future. Civil war would probably pit the federal Army against Croatian and possibly Slovene national guard forces. Serbian officials have said publicly

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that they will consider creating a republic Army if any other republic secedes, and a war of republic against republic is possible. [REDACTED]

The Army would have many advantages in a civil war--including superior firepower and mobility--but, in our view, probably could not suppress republic forces fighting with guerrilla tactics, as they are trained to do. Fighting would likely be protracted, and the Army probably would fracture eventually on ethnic lines under the strain. [REDACTED]

We believe that several developments nonetheless could lead to civil war. Military efforts to contain communal violence, for example, could result in clashes with republic security forces that escalate out of hand. Pro-Serb military leaders such as Chief of Staff Blagoje Adzic could gain control of the Army and throw their lot with ethnic Serb combatants. Even current military leaders, including the relatively moderate Kadjevic, could decide to move against the leaders in seceding republics in a last effort to save the federation. [REDACTED]

Although we believe it unlikely, it is still possible that the Yugoslav factions will avoid any escalation of violence. The republics could simply "muddle apart," with republic leaders avoiding any expansion of their conflicts despite low-level violence. This outcome would require great--and uncharacteristic--forbearance on all parts. Croatian leaders, for example, would need to accept tacitly that they do not control a large chunk of their territory. And the Serbs, for their part, would have to show restraint in the absence of Croatian attempts to assert control. [REDACTED]

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